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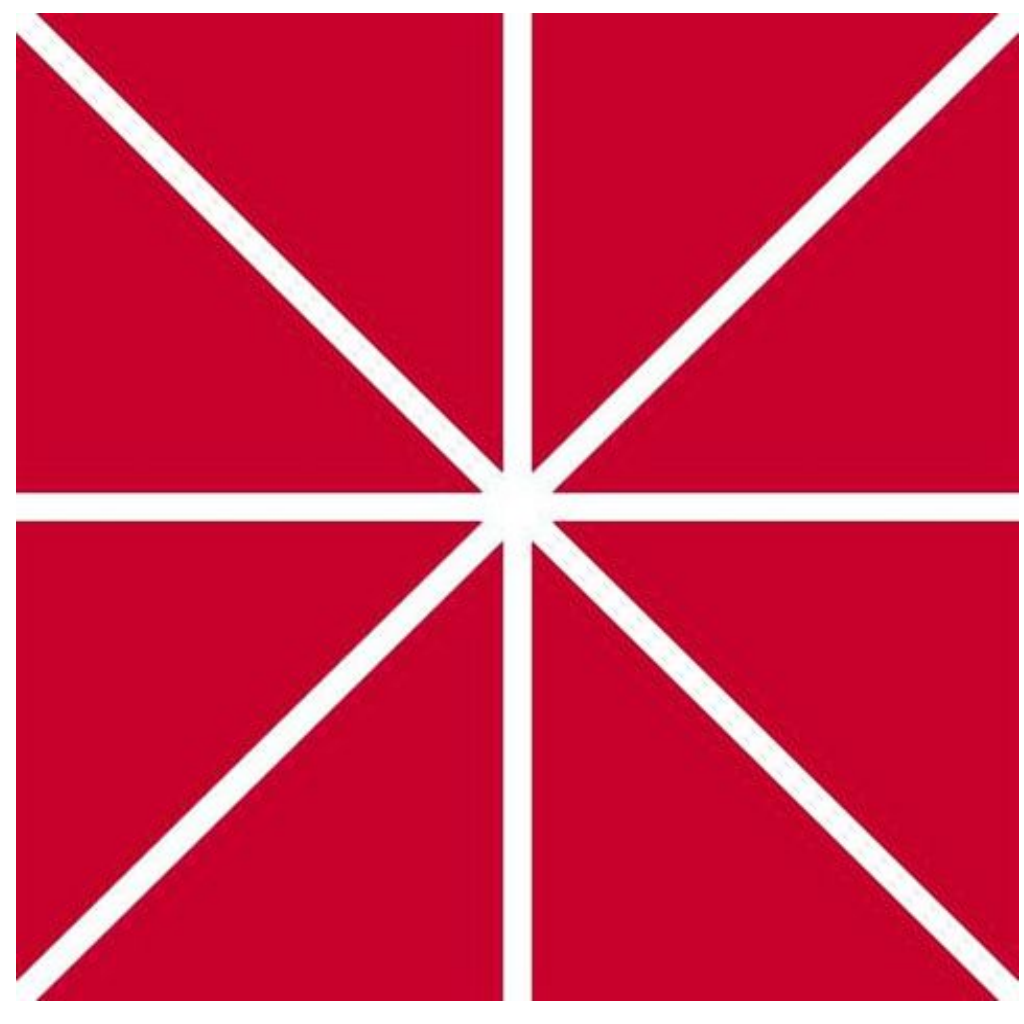


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African American Culture in Historical Art Museums: Remembering A Buried Tragic Past

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Thesis

Many art and cultural institutions in the United States have marginalized African American culture because their story has been told in a white national narrative. To change the ideas embodied in museums, Fred Wilson, an art activist, recontextualizes objects to highlight cultural differences through the utilization of installation framing. Wilson confronts history and racial biases by recognizing the need to reveal the tragedy and truth of African American history through culture.

Significance

By revealing the museum's lack of transparency, Wilson's installations leave visitors humbled and lost as they confront their initial obliviousness to the museum's flawed depiction of African American culture and historical past. Wilson's installations have motivated curators and museum directors to confront issues of implicit bias in their exhibitions so that African American historical truth is not neglected or absent.

Conclusion

Fred Wilson's objective is to create a new narrative through each of his works, which generally stress racial biases and preferences through the juxtaposition of artifacts in cultural institutions. It relays back to the central idea that a white individual narrating a person of color's history will most likely interpret his or her archival experience inaccurately because their ethnicities do not correlate.

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Case Study 1

Mining the Museum (Maryland Historical Society, 1992-1993)

- Wilson unearthed objects in the Maryland Historical Society's archives and juxtaposed "forgotten" pieces with the objects already on display in the institution to disclose the museum's preferences and racial biases.
- In his piece, *Metalwork*, Wilson juxtaposed immaculate Victorian objects with a pair of iron slave shackles. Wilson succeeded in his attempt to create a tenor of discomfort once the audience is cognizant of the connection between the two kinds of metal works. The manufacturing and assembly of the pitcher, flacons, and teacups were made possible due to the enslavement and subordination of African Americans.

Metalwork 1793-1880



Case Study 2

E Pluribus Unum (Indiana, 2011)

- *E Pluribus Unum* is a recontextualized sculpture of the semi-nude African American male of the Soldiers and Sailors Monument located in Indianapolis; the unidentified man is seated in an upright position, tilted forward and holding a flag representing the African Diaspora and African flags.
- The controversial piece *E Pluribus Unum* has caused various objections from African American protestors, who argue that they wanted a new image demonstrating the black community without the insinuation of emancipation or slavery.
- The initial approval of *E Pluribus Unum* by the Central Indiana Community Foundation, then its subsequent rejection suggests that the tragedy of unresolved ethnic issues as a nation is still prevalent in present-day America.

E Pluribus Unum



Case Study 3

Connecting Cultures: A World in Brooklyn (Brooklyn Museum, 2012)

- *Connecting Cultures: A World in Brooklyn* is a long-term installation that visually stimulates the audience to make cross-cultural comparisons.
- In his piece, *Iago's Mirror*, the glass is painted black along with the mirrors and frames stacked, to reflect on the African Diaspora and race in the United States.
- The audience generates the idea of African American culture, represented through the black mirrors, collecting and reflecting in the United States and internationally as presented in the Venetian High Renaissance frames.

Iago's Mirror

